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An American Obsession: Science, Medicine, and Homosexuality in Modern Society

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caratteri dell'azione intenzionale come aspetto dell'attività umana – sono sempre le tesi di W. Sellars a costituire un importante punto di riferimento – differente da quella che viene messa in luce dalle descrizioni e dalle spiegazioni della medesima da un punto di vista più propriamente cognitivo. La formulazione di una teoria del carattere significativo delle azioni umane su base scientifico naturale costituisce così la base – s'intende provvisoria e incompleta – di un modello scientifico-naturale dell'azione morale.

STEFANO POGGI, *Dipartimento di Filosofia, Via Bolognese 52, 50139 Firenze, Italy.*

JENNIFER TERRY, *An American Obsession: Science, Medicine, and Homosexuality in Modern Society*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999, xiv + 537 pp., illus., \$75.00 (\$20.00 paperback).

A history focused exclusively on scientific research of homosexuality in the United States would hardly qualify as an American obsession. As her title suggests, however, Jennifer Terry's interests are broader and her book is richer for it. Cast as a Foucaultian narrative, Terry's history recovers the constitution of homosexuality as a scientific, yet varying, subject. In doing so she seeks to demonstrate that scientific understanding of homosexuality has been dynamic and historically contingent.

Starting with the problem of classifying human diversity in the nineteenth century, Terry charts the deployment of 'deviance' in juxtaposition to the 'natural order' of 'civilized society.' Biologically constituted by scientists such as Richard Kraft-Ebing, homosexuality was seen through an evolutionary lens as backward or degenerate (pp. 46-47). Such 'degeneration' was associated with lower classes and criminality by some, but also led to calls for moderation as homosexuality moved from a 'punishable moral offense' to a 'medical matter' (p. 70). In Germany, Magnus Hirschfeld, for instance, used scientific research on homosexuality to argue for its decriminalization. While much has been written on Hirschfeld's efforts in Germany, the originality and importance of Terry's work are best realized when she turns to the development of responses to similar types of medicalization in the United States.

Terry locates the influence of German research on sexuality in an American culture anxious about changing gender roles and eager to reform a long list of urban vices and social problems. Recast by Americans first as a form of madness and later as a symptom of 'modern conditions,' homosexuality became part of the progressive reform agenda. In an incisive set of chapters that form the core of this book, Terry demonstrates how progressive era concerns with 'normal sexuality' and the 'normal family' led to a crucial shift in attitudes toward homosexuality. Rather than view homosexuality as inherently pathological, researchers such as Katharine Bement Davis recast homosexuality as a variant of 'normal' sexuality. The value of Terry's analytic framework is most evident in her discussion of the history of sex variants research. Her chapter on George Henry and the Committee for the Study of Sex Variants expertly captures Henry's scientific impulse and then deftly juxtaposes Henry's attitudes with those of his subjects in the next chapter. This analysis is made possible by the extensive interviews included as a part of Henry's study as well as by Terry's interest in giving voice to those who were subjected to science. As such, Terry's understanding of science goes well beyond conventional historical contextualization, which she also provides with great skill. Indeed Terry's account of Kinsey's sex research and its often negative reception in post-war America is beautifully

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contextualized in terms of growing domestic and international paranoia characteristic of the Cold War Era. In such an atmosphere, Kinsey's reports fueled public fears of subversion and deviance.

One of the themes of *An American Obsession* is that throughout the twentieth century American homosexuals have both been drawn to scientific accounts of homosexuality and questioned those accounts. Terry convincingly argues that understanding the perceived promise and peril of scientific research on homosexuality, then and now, requires that we situate both scientist and subject in relation to the cultural anxieties and political realities that are informing their attitudes.

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